

## William the Coqueror and Other Gunn-Sinclair Ancestry

### Prologue

He stands on a hill above the mouth of the River Orne. He looks north over La Manche. It is windy and the water is choppy. His russet hair blows in the wind. If you look closely, you might see a tear in the corner of his eyes. He is a young man, barely nineteen, but he has seen more war and death than many twice his age. A few weeks ago he had won his first major battle. They would later call it the Battle of Val-és-Dunes. Many of his enemies were dead, imprisoned, or banished. He felt safer now. “Yes, safer. But never safe”, he cautions himself. His thoughts turn to Edward, his cousin – and yet more than a cousin – a father really – in all but name. Edward lived with William and his family for more than a quarter of a century – an atheling in exile. He was there when William’s father died while off on a crusade, and he was with him until he was fourteen. He left in ’42, finally returning to England to claim his crown. He was the only man William ever trusted, and this man he loved was also in a life and death struggle. William sorely wished he could help. He however had his own battles to fight, and all he could spare were his prayers.

There might be a home for him across this channel, he hoped. His own call him the Bastard. They want him dead, and the French barely tolerate him. But the Viking born keep the north safe from other Vikings. Most wouldn’t be caught dead in his land. His land – and not his land. A Bastard and a Viking would never belong here. He would be at war until his death. And his sons would face war and his grandsons and his grandson’s sons. But England was another story – it could be safer – easier to defend. He had roots there. A family who accepted him – Viking born too. And a throne promised to him by a fatherly cousin. Yes, there will be a home for him across this channel. “And one day,” he promises himself, “a Viking will keep its lands safe from other Vikings.”

### Beginnings

In 1066 William the Bastard made his home across the English Channel, and by so doing he became known as William the Conqueror. His descendents would reign over a country that would later hold dominion over much of the world.

William the Conqueror was a Viking descendant. Back in the early 10<sup>th</sup> Century his original homeland in northern France was granted to Rolf the Viking, William’s great-grandfather, by King Charles the Simple in the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte. The river Epte forms the eastern boundary of a land that would later be known as Normandy, named after the Scandinavian North-Men who made it their home.

I believe I am also a Viking descendant, although any such blood in my veins would be watered down quite significantly by now. I claim this ancestry through the Clans Gunn and Sinclair of Sutherland, Caithness and the Orkney Isles of northern Scotland. My name is Murray, which most fortuitously is of Norse origin meaning ‘mariner’ or ‘by the sea’. My middle name is William, which could be interpreted to mean ‘strong headed’.

The Gunn name is also of Norwegian, or Norse origin. Although the two primary origin theories differ, both claim that the Gunn Clan has a Viking origin. A more prideful boast is that the Gunn

Clan descends from the legendary 'Ultimate Viking', Sweyn Asleifsson, whose grandson was named Gunni. This Gunni's wife, Ranghild, "inherited great estates on the Scottish mainland in Caithness (Katanes) and Sutherland (Sundrlund – meaning "southland")" (retrieved August 21, 2011 from <http://skyelander.orgfree.com/gunn1.html>).

Most appropriately for Vikings, 'Gunn' means 'War' or 'Battle' in Norse (see 'Clan Gunn' at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clan\\_Gunn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clan_Gunn)). In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century "Sweyn used his homeland in Orkney, and properties in the Western Isles of Scotland, as bases to launch raids on the rest of the British Isles" (Retrieved August 21, 2011 from <http://www.orkneyjar.com/history/historicalfigures/sweyn/index.html>).

Another set of theories is that the Clan is descended from another Gunni, either "the second son of Olav the Black, the Norwegian King of Man and the Isles, who died in 1237", or a century earlier from "the son of Olav of Gairsay (a different Olav) who lived in Orkney" (Retrieved August 21, 2011 from <http://skyelander.orgfree.com/gunn1.html>).

Regardless of which history one chooses to believe, there is compelling evidence that by virtue of the location of its homeland the Clan Gunn has Viking roots. According to DNA researcher Bryan Sykes, 30 to 40 percent of the current population of the Orkneys and Caithness are genetic descendents of the Vikings (Saxons, Vikings, and Celts, p. 194). This genetic connection comes from both the male and female population, and as such Sykes argues that this area of Scotland was populated, rather than raided, by the Norse.

The Orkneys, Caithness and Sutherland of northern Scotland is/was also the homeland of the Clan Sinclair. The name Sinclair is derived from Saint-Clair-sur-Elle in Normandy. The Sinclair name also "comes indirectly from the hermit St. Clare or St. Clere, or St. Clair, or in Latin, Sanctus Clarus. He lived near the town that is now called St. Clair sur l'Epte" (retrieved August 21, 2011 from <http://sinclair.quarterman.org/who/hermit/index.html>). As the story goes a powerful English noblewoman apparently had an overwhelming crush on Clair who escaped to Normandy's River Epte when her unreciprocated love turned to hatred. Her henchmen tracked him down and while he knelt in prayer they beheaded him. The blood of this healer was so potent that "a new spring came out of the ground and washed away all signs of it". To commemorate the miracle a Church was built on the spot and the village of St Clair-sur-Epte emerged.

The Gunns and Sinclairs are likely not direct descendents of William the Conqueror, however, Rolf (who was also known as Gangerolv, Hrolf, Gungu-Hrolfr, Hrolf the Walker, Rollon, Rollo, or Robert) was the son of Rognvald Eysteinnsson. Rognvald 'The Wise' was the Earl of More, and founder of the Earldom of Orkney (Retrieved August 21, 2011 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rognvald\\_Eysteinnsson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rognvald_Eysteinnsson)).

Rolf's mother was Countess Ragnhilda, daughter of the sea King Rolf Nefia. Rolf's brother, Thorir, succeeded Rognvald to the jarldom of Møre and married King Harold's daughter, Arbota. The house of Rognvald was one of the oldest lines of rulers in Norway (Kissing a King's Foot, Laurel Fechner, <http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/l/a/j/Kevin-C-Lajiness-NJ/FILE/0070page.html>).

The story goes that Rolf was born on the island of Giske near Alesund in Romsdahl of More, Norway. Rolf's father Rongvald accompanied Harald Fairhair (a near relative and a famous Viking King) on his expeditions to Ireland and Scotland, where his son Ivarr was killed. In compensation King Harald granted Rongvald the isles of Orkney and Shetland. Rongvald returned to Norway and gave the northern isles to his brother Sigurd Eysteinsson (also known as sea King Einar). Sigurd expanded his domains to the Scottish mainland, including Caithness and Sutherland. Later, after Sigurd's death, Turf-Einar, also son of Rongvald, was granted the islands and founded a dynasty that would last for centuries. Einar's descendant, Isobel, married William Sinclair, the 11th Baron of Rosslyn, the Earl of Orkney (1455-1470), a grandson of Henry Sinclair the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Orkney (Retrieved August 21, 2011 from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rognvald\\_Eysteinsson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rognvald_Eysteinsson)).

In 1066, nine St. Clare knights accompanied their cousin William the Conqueror to England. These knights, also descendents of Rolf, fought by William's side at the Battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066. Afterward, many of them remained in England, and one of their sons, William 'the Seemly' Sinclair (William de Sancto Claro), went on to Scotland where he became the first Baron of Rosslyn (south of Edinburgh) and the ancestor of the Scottish Sinclairs (Origins of Clan Sinclair, <http://sinclair.quarterman.org/history/med/origins.html>) and (<http://www.rampantscotland.com/clans/blclansinclair.htm>). His descendant, Henry I Sinclair, became the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Orkney in 1379 ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_I\\_Sinclair,\\_Earl\\_of\\_Orkney](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_I_Sinclair,_Earl_of_Orkney)). The Orkney Isles, Caithness and Sutherland were under Norwegian (Viking) jurisdiction until the late 1300's, when Henry I Sinclair became Earl.

The mother of Mary Ritch, my great-great grandmother, was Ann Sinclair of the Clan Sinclair. So, I guess you could say that William the Conqueror is a 31<sup>st</sup> cousin, thrice removed.

The most famous Gunn of all, from my particular point of view, is of course, Mr. Peter Shearer Gunn, my great-great-grandfather. Peter Gunn was born in Scrabster, in the Thurso District of Caithness, on February 9, 1864 to Barbara Gunn. His father was unknown, but his mother has a solid 'Gunn' connection back through several generations in the Kildonan Parish of the Scottish Highlands. Caithness is across the Pentland Firth from the Orkney Island of Hoy (easily visible from Caithness). Pentland Firth in old Norse means the 'fjord of Pictland'. Prior to the occupation of the Norse it was referred to as the Sea of Orcs, a pictish tribe who occupied the Orkneys.

Peter joined the Hudson's Bay Company in February, 1883, and from the port of Stromness he sailed to Canada where he would live the rest of his life.

The most famous Sinclair of all, and the second most famous Gunn of all, also from my particular point of view, is of course, Ms. Mary Ann Ritch, my great-great-grandmother. Mary was born January 20, 1865 to parents John Ritch and Ann Sinclair in Winbreck, Rackwick Hoy (an Orkney Island just north of the mainland of Scotland). Rackwick means 'Rock Bay' in old Norse. Mary's grandmother, on her father's side, was Elizabeth Gunn, one of three daughters of Donald Gunn, likely also of the Kildonan Parish in the Scottish Highlands.

Mary came to the Athabasca District of the Northwest Territories of Canada in 1891 to marry Peter.

It is widely believed, and also widely disputed, that Henry Sinclair, with a member of the Clan Gunn among his party, made a voyage to the New World in 1398, landing in Nova Scotia and New England. The member of the Clan Gunn was also known as the Westford Knight (possibly Sir James Gunn), and he is thought to have perished during the expedition ("Clan Gunn", [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clan\\_Gunn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clan_Gunn)).

Later, the Orkneys would play a major role in the settlement of Western Canada through the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), established in 1670. This 'Company of Adventurers' attracted many young men from Scotland, seeking their fame and fortune, and "in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, "the islands of Orkney, a windswept archipelago just off the northern tip of mainland Scotland, provided the main source of labour for the company" (<http://www.scotland.org/features/item/an-adventurous-connection/>).

The Orkneys suffered a harsh climate, and the Orkney men were therefore more easily able to adapt to the extreme weather conditions of northern Canada. The HBC set up a major port at Stromness, on the main island of Orkney, where the ships took on workers, provisions and water. Contracts were typically five years in length, but many of the men settled permanently in Canada.

In the late eighteenth century, "three-quarters of the Hudson's Bay Company workforce in Canada were Orcadians. In 1799, of the 530 men working in the Hudson's Bay Company posts in North America, 416 were from Orkney". This was not without complaint from those remaining in the Orkneys:

"Writing in the Old Statistical Account, for Orphir, the Reverend Francis Liddell complained:

"Instead of offering an honourable service to their King and country, or staying at home to cultivate their lands, and protect their wives, their children, and their parents, for the sum of £6 per annum hire themselves out for slaves in a savage land."

Those of the Orkneys and in Stromness in particular, are proud of their heritage.

"At the south end of the Stromness' single winding street is Login's Well. This watering hole supplied water to ships calling at the port but was sealed in 1931. A stone by the well bears an inscription proclaiming that water from the well was used to supply Captain Cook's Discovery and Sir John Franklin's arctic exploration vessels as well as the ships of the Hudson Bay" (Stromness, The Haven Bay, <http://www.orkneyjar.com/orkney/stromness/hbs.htm>).

See gunn family history at [Clan Gunn Society of North America | \(cgsna.org\)](http://cgsna.org)

[Home - Clan Gunn Society](#)

<http://www.badbeafamilies.com/Kildonan%20to%20Manitoba.htm>

<http://www.badbeafamilies.com/timeline.htm>

Another [source says](#): 1813 and 1819 - so savagely that these clearances provoked the first recorded dissent against the evictions anywhere in the Highlands. The clans here were Gunns, Mathesons, Mackays, Macbeths and Sutherlands - all the peoples of the Sutherland/Caithness border region, but Kildonan was predominantly Gunn territory, and it was the Gunns who resisted in 1813. They first ran off a Mr Reid, agent for some southern sheep-farmers, who had visit the strath, asking questions and taking notes; Mr Reid declared to anyone who would listen that he had been attacked by a mob and had barely escaped with his life. IT WAS JUST THE EXCUSE the Duke of Sutherland's factors had been praying for. The male staff of the estate were sworn in as special constables and a detachment of infantry sent out at the double from [Fort George](#). This was more than the Gunns could withstand and their resistance melted away. Within three months large areas of upper Kildonan had been entirely cleared, and the people offered tiny allotments of poor land on the clifftops near Helmsdale, or sent into exile in Canada - the choice of many of the younger people. In June of the year they sailed from Stromness in Orkney, bound for the Red River settlement in Manitoba. IN 1819 THE LAST INHABITANTS were cleared from lower Kildonan. This time there was no dissent; the people had learned by bitter experience that neither government, nor law courts, nor their church, would speak a word or lift a hand in their defence. They went quietly into exile; to Glasgow; to whatever patch of land they might be offered to scrape a living. Some went to join their kinsmen across the Atlantic. After the events of 1813, there had been further evictions and emigrations in 1815, when 700 Kildonan clansfolk left for the Canadian settlements along the Red River and in Glengarry County. They had a hard time and had to fight both the harsh Canadian winter, Cree Indians and renegade Frenchmen. They called their new home Kildonan

Douglas, David C. (1999). *William the Conqueror: The Norman impact upon England*. Yale University Press.

Sykes, B. (2006). *Saxons, Vikings, and Celts – The genetic roots of Britain and Ireland*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.